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GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE MINING INDUSTRY

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Mining was one of the most prominent industries in the Tri-State District from the 1880s through the 1950s. This time period was very instrumental to the development of the Tri-State region of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri. Mining offered employment to many in the area, and mining camps would seemingly spring up overnight in some case. There is a very good case made that work in the mines was extremely hazardous to one's health. Falling rocks, working with explosives, and working in a dusty, damp area were all a part of a miner's day. Prior to government legislation, men could have been subject to working in these conditions without the most basic first-aid supplies being present. Disease was common among miners because their low wages translated into not having proper food, clothing, or housing. Sanitation was often poor or non-existent.¹ All men working in a mining camp could have been subject to sharing the same bathroom, locker room. Disease spread easily through the mining camps. Government involvement and regulation became essential for the survival of the mines and those who operated in them. Government policy is responsible for doing good and bad things for the mining industry. The legislation passed by the state mining departments is evidence of the poor working conditions that miners were subjected to on a daily basis, and working conditions did improve for miners. The neglect of the national government to pass legislation protecting the mining industry from cheap imported lead and zinc, eventually led to the closing of mines in the Tri-State district.

Life in the Tri-State district was very interesting during the time when mining was the area's top industry. People in the region were very proud of their hard work and production in the mining industry. There are many stats that show the areas productivity and efficiency in producing lead and zinc. There are no stats that show the cost to the workers themselves or the

¹Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, "The Street of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950," *Journal of American History* 77 (Sep., 1990), 526.

area.² The exact date on when mining began in the region is not known, but commercial mining was underway in the Missouri part of the region by 1848.³ Homes on or near the mining camps were very poorly constructed because they often went up over night. Life went on at a frantic pace for people living in the region. Inspectors often found problems with sanitation at these sites. Their recommended improvements were rarely carried out. Government interaction, not just legislation, would be needed to improve conditions for the miners.

When mining camps initially opened it was common for miners to work nine to ten hour shifts six days a week and had Sunday off. Miners did not have much free time, and how they spent that time varied greatly. Miners with families often gardened, fished, hunted, and raised livestock in their free time.⁴ The mining camps offered a great amount of entertainment to offer the “not so family” man as well. At least 75 Salons were open in Joplin, many of them were open day and night. Many bars offered free concerts every night from a full orchestra.⁵ It was easy for young men working in the mines to have led a life that consisted of hard work during the day and harder play at night. This was especially true on Saturday nights in Joplin, Missouri. Saturday night was the highlight of the week’s activities, after receiving their weekly wages many miners would head straight to the stores to stock up on supplies for the remainder of the week.⁶

World War I in Europe caused a skyrocketing demand for lead and zinc, this demand helped the growth of the mining industry, especially in the Tri-State district. Rich mineral

² Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza*, 179.

³ Arrel Gibson, “Early Mining Camps in Northeast Oklahoma,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34 (1956), 196.

⁴ Arrel Gibson, “A Social History of the Tri-State District,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 37 (1959), 183.

⁵ *Ibid*, 184.

⁶ *Ibid*.

deposits, especially those near Picher, Oklahoma, had great value in the mining industry. The labor for the miners was intense and brutal. A healthy worker would shovel between 75,000 and 100,000 pounds of rock a day. All of that lifting typically ended with the miner making between \$3 and \$5. The hard work was obviously a big factor in a miner's body just physically breaking down.

Disease was all too common in the Tri-State area. Tuberculosis and Silicosis are the two diseases that seemed to have had the greatest effect on the miners. Miners breathed flint dust produced by the drilling and blasting at mines and often became infected. By the 1930s silicosis, a lung disease caused by breathing in silica dust particles, was considered the most important occupational disease. The high rate of silicosis was especially alarming because it put miners at an even greater risk to contract tuberculosis. One mine owner disclosed to the Bureau of Mines that between 1907 and 1914 he employed 750 men in Joplin. The next year he reported that only about 50 of those men were still alive. Except for a dozen or so, all of the men who had died had done so as a result of tuberculosis⁷. Many miners easily contracted tuberculosis. Poor housing in the mining camps allowed the disease spread to miners' families. Organizations came together to combat the disease. Safety precautions intended to help limit the spread of the disease, but the negligent miners often ignored these.⁸

As far as housing goes it is safe to say that miners did not care much for substantial homes. Sanitation and labor inspectors often frowned upon the condition of the mining camps, but the miners were satisfied. The fast pace of life and the eternal rush that miners always

⁷ Markowitz and Rosner, 529.

⁸Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza*, 183.

seemed to be in can be traced back to the beginning of the mines.⁹ Prospectors did not need adequate housing until they struck a good plot of land because they were always on the move. In Picher, Oklahoma during the 1920s unplanned communities would pop up almost overnight. These communities showed a total disregard for sewer systems, sanitary water, or any other sanitation or public health services.¹⁰ The frantic pace at which the workers lived their lives with did not allow them time to build good homes and helped contribute to the spread of disease.

Despite not having decent working or living conditions the mining industry continued to grow in the Tri-State region. As mining became one of the strongest and most important industries in America, as a result government interaction and policy became necessary. In 1925 the Tri-State mining district produced well over 900,000 tons of lead and zinc concentrate worth more than \$57,000,000. These astronomical numbers were a direct result of the hard work performed by employees of the mines.¹¹ These workers exposed themselves to extremely hazardous conditions such as falling roof rock or poor ventilation. Not only were they subject to these life-threatening conditions but also a lack of drinking water and toilets underground. The lack of toilets “resulted in a promiscuous ground pollution in the mines.”¹² Oklahoma legislature enacted a law by 1940 that stated that there had to be one toilet per twenty-five men. The law came with revisions to the miners' changing rooms or bath houses. Conditions in the bathrooms must have been disgusting for the state legislature to have to take these matters into their own

⁹Gibson, “A Social History of the Tri-State District,” 185.

¹⁰Alan Derickson, “On Dump Heap: Employee Medical Screening in the Tri-State Zinc – Lead Industry, 1924-1932,” *The Business History Review* 64 (1988); 660.

¹¹Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza*, 179.

¹²*Ibid*, 186.

hands.¹³ Mining companies were so worried about turning a bigger profit that they did not give sanitation any thought until the government had to get involved. "Health considerations... have been neglected to a certain extent by many of the operators," reported Clarence A. Wright.¹⁴ The Oklahoma legislation also put regulations on the size of the changing rooms, saying that it must be efficient to accommodate all men. Mining camps had to provide proper lighting and heat in the change rooms, as well as hot and cold water. Miners did not have a great deal of leverage in bargaining for better working conditions or better living conditions in the mining camps. In the 1930s America was going through the Great Depression and any job would was a good job. Miners did not care how bad their bathrooms were; they just wanted a job. They wanted to be there to work, no matter what the cost was to their health. The miners wanted a paycheck, and would do anything to get one, even if it meant working in such poor conditions. The miners' inability to improve their working conditions meant that the government would have to establish standards for the mining camps.

The most important thing to mine owners was turning a profit, not protecting employees from the hazards of the mines. Mining companies did not worry about the poor working conditions that the miners slaved through on a day to day basis. Many mining camps blamed the miners' lifestyle and living conditions as the source of disease. Managers of the mines blamed the poor health of employees on a lack of personal hygiene. Mine owners gave little sympathy to the miners for the poor conditions they lived in. Many owners felt that if the miners would live cleaner lives at home the diseases are less likely to spread in the workplace. Organized labor and officials held the managers responsible for financing improvements to improve working

¹³Oklahoma Mining Department, *Mining Laws of the State of Oklahoma*, by Robert H. Brown (Oklahoma City, 1940).

¹⁴ Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza*, 181.

conditions. It would be the duty of the government to enforce these regulations.¹⁵ Mine owners were very unwilling to change their ways. When the government regulated that miners go to the Picher Clinic for physical examinations, the employees saw this as an excuse for the owners to fire them.¹⁶ One major problem exposed in this time period was the lack of authority that the government had to make legislation that it could enforce at the mines. This would be a problem for the government in mining communities throughout the 1930s. The government could pass all of the legislation it wanted but without the power to enforce the legislation, laws were essentially non-existent.

No matter how hard the government tried to make mining safer through legislation there was always going to be accidents because of the dangerous nature of the occupation. First-aid supplies and first-aid training are very important to helping the victim of an accident. Oklahoma mining law regulates that every mine must have some specific emergency supplies. These supplies include properly constructed stretchers and woolen, waterproof blankets to carry away victims. The law also calls for there to be a sufficient quantity of linseed and olive oil, bandages, and linen.¹⁷ Under the assumption that the Oklahoma Mining Department would not have to make a law if it was unnecessary, working conditions before the passing of this legislation had to have been extremely dangerous. Not only are the miners subject to falling rocks, out of control explosions, and poor ventilation, they may not have had the supplies or materials on standby to fix a simple cut. There was no mention of first-aid training in Oklahoma legislation.

¹⁵Markowitz and Rosner, 527.

¹⁶*Ibid*, 534.

¹⁷Oklahoma Mining Department, Robert H. Brown.

Kansas mines had embraced first-aid by 1930. Kansas did not pass any first-aid legislation prior to 1930¹⁸ but there was an effort to increase the awareness of first-aid in the state. In the summer of 1930 meetings were held by the Mine Rescue Department in an effort to put on a first-aid competition among teams from all industrial organizations. Cash prizes offered motivation to employees to become more interested in first-aid. Unfortunately the competition never held. Kansas Gas and Electric Company was the first company mentioned to have held a first-aid demonstration during its annual company picnic and was highly commended by the Mine Rescue Department.¹⁹

In 1935 there were 442 no-lost-time accidents reported in the mines of Kansas. The Kansas Mine Inspector's Report defined a no-lost-time accident as an accident that did not require any time to be lost as a direct result of an accident.²⁰ In that same year the Arma Rescue Station trained more people than it had in years in the techniques of first-aid. There was also a first-aid demonstration held by the State Safety Council during their annual picnic in Topeka.²¹

Working conditions and poor health were not the only reasons the government had to get involved in the mining industry. To many in the mining industry the United States' tariff on imported metals was too low. Currency devaluation in over forty countries was one of the big factors of foreign metals being so cheap. The United States also had trade agreements with other countries that kept the tariff on imported lead and zinc low. Government officials felt that they

¹⁸ Kansas Commission of Labor and Industry, *Annual Report of Coal Mine and Metal Mine Inspection and Mine Rescue Department*, by William P. Keegan (Topeka, 1931).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Kansas Commission of Labor and Industry, *Annual Report of Coal Mine and Metal Mine Inspection and Mine Rescue Department*, by William P. Keegan (Topeka, 1936).

²¹ *Ibid.*

had in effect subsidized foreign mining operations indirectly.²² Mine owners did not have enough incentive in the market to keep their mines open because the value of domestic metals was too low.

By the mid-1920s and into the late 1930s many people in the mining industry were concerned about the lack of a tariff on foreign metals. They thought that the greatest threat to the mining industry was a tariff that was too low. It was cheaper for producers to import the metals from Canada, England, or South American countries as opposed to buying the metal produced domestically.²³ Due to the lack of a tariff, the government would have to become a very important player in the mining industry. People in the Tri-State area pleaded for their state senators and representatives to help keep the mining industry alive by passing laws that would raise the tariff on imported metal. Miners in the area were even willing to take less pay as long as they had the opportunity for work.²⁴ The greatest reason for Congress to look into passing legislation to protect the mining industry was the threat of conflict.

Evan Just, Secretary and Spokesperson of the Lead and Zinc Mining Industry in Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma, advised the Senate that any tariff reductions would ruin the mining industry of the Tri-State region.²⁵ The alarming part about this evidence is that it is twelve years before the national conference in Denver. The government would have had plenty of time to pass legislation in those twelve years. Congress decided to keep with the status quo despite the

²²Facts Showing Immediate Need For Passage of Mining Legislation, Compiled by Domestic Mining Associations, Denver, Colorado, February 2,3,4, 1950, Box 41 Picher Collection, Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Associated Press, "Zinc Tariff Plea is Made in Capitol," *Joplin Globe*, April 6, 1938.

pleas coming from the Midwest. Senator Josh Lee claimed to have made a written protest to be looked over by the Reciprocity Committee, and believed that one of the President's assistants would be listening to recommendations from committee members.²⁶ In December of 1938 the tariff on zinc and lead was reduced. Many in the Tri-State region had been concerned about tariff destroying their industry. The area would be demoralized as a result of the twenty percent tariff reduction according to Evan Just. He estimated that as many as 100,000 people would feel the effect of this tariff, either directly or indirectly, who were dependent on the mining industry. It was anticipated that 6,000 mine and smelter workers would lose their jobs. Evan Just described the disappointment in the area by saying "No trade concessions justify the destruction of domestic industry and employment."²⁷ Just and Senator Lee knew the stress put on the Tri-State mining region first hand. Despite their best efforts, no legislation was drafted with the intention of raising the tariff on imported lead and Zinc.

With World War II being fought in the early 1940s the demand for lead and zinc rose significantly.²⁸ During times of war the demand for metal war was very high and the mines were able to survive the tariff reduction throughout the 1940s. America was able to provide itself with enough metal ores. The Tri-State region was one of the country's leaders in lead and zinc production. When the war was settled and business was back to usual, the tariff issue needed to be addressed, and soon.

²⁶ "Senator Lee Sees Hope Zinc and Lead Ore Tariffs Will Not Be Reduced In Trade Pact Bartering," *Miami News Record*, April 24, 1938.

²⁷ "Press Wires Carry Story of Threat to Tri-State Region In Zinc Tariff Reduction." *Miami News Record*. December 1, 1938.

²⁸ Facts Showing Immediate Need For Passage of Mining Legislation, Domestic Mining Associations, 1950.

In a 1950 mining conference many members of government mentioned that if America became too dependent on foreign metals it would run the risk of not being able to supply itself with enough metal domestically. Congress thought that being able to provide itself with enough lead and zinc ore was a huge benefit in both World War I and World War II. For America to remain a superpower, Congress would need to pass legislation to help a struggling mining industry.²⁹ Seventy-three percent of mines in Western States had closed by 1950.³⁰ Tri-State area workers were willing to take a pay cut to keep the mines open. Miners' daily wages went from \$5.50 to \$3.25 and from \$4.50 to \$2.50 in 1938 as an attempt to keep mines open, but mines were still only able to stay in operation for two to three days per week.³¹ Although it was a good thought, due to the rising cost of living there was no way the miners could survive if they were making less money than they already make now. Congress issued a statement in February of 1950 during a conference in Denver, Colorado, where it convened with the intent of drafting legislation to raise the tariff on imported metals – “We are proud of the efficiency and ability of the American metal miner. We cannot and will not permit his standard of living to be jeopardized, but current policies are forcing cease of mining operations because of competition with foreign producers.”³² Despite the arguments presented by fellow Congressmen no legislation passed. Evan Just's fears that recognized twelve years earlier, now seemed like a certainty.

²⁹Press Wires Carry Story of Threat to Tri-State Region in Zinc Tariff Reduction,” *Miami News Record*.

³⁰Facts Showing Immediate Need For Passage of Mining Legislation, Domestic Mining Associations, 1950.

³¹“Zinc Tariff Plea is Made in Capitol,” *Joplin Globe*, April 6, 1938.

³²Facts Showing Immediate Need For Passage of Mining Legislation, Domestic Mining Associations, 1950.

Mine companies in the Tri-State region could not overcome the low tariff on lead and zinc imports. In 1953 district mines to closed because they could not compete with the prices of foreign metals. The Tri-State Ore Producers Association sent delegates to Washington to appeal the low tariff.³³ Their efforts would do little to change the low tariff. The lack of a respectable tariff on imported metal was directly responsible for shutting down mines not only in the Tri-State area, but also mines across the country. The government chose to remain distant and to not pass legislation to protect a domestic industry. Had the government been able to step in and protect against the import of cheaper metals it is possible that the mining industry of the Tri-State district could have been saved. The area was so productive from the late 1800s until the forced closings in the 1950s the industry would have been much better off if the government had passed the legislation it talked about at the conference in Denver in 1950. Congress ultimately felt it was unnecessary to protect the mining industry from foreign invasion and focused on other issues.

The Government's role in society has been a hot topic since the founding of our country. The government's job is to protect its people. The government knew that it needed to begin regulating mining camps when miners were constantly dying of silicosis and tuberculosis due to poor working and living conditions. A deeper look shows that the government even had regulations on the type of emergency materials that were necessary to keep on hand in the mines. Government involvement, regulation, and legislation of the industry were important in helping the working conditions in the Tri-State area improve. The government would have measurable success in protecting the miners when it came to making the workplace safer and cleaner. It is also fair to say that the government dropped the ball when it did not realize the threat of foreign

³³ Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza*, 178.

metals replacing the lead and zinc produced within its borders. The Tri-State region was one of the world's leading producers in lead and zinc mining from the late 1800s until the 1950s.

The government knew that the mining industry was very important to the survival of America, especially during times of war.³⁴ Thousands of Americans depended on the mines as a place of employment, and America depended on them for the metal they produced. Metal becomes even more precious in a time of war. Congress saw it necessary to argue tariff reductions on imported metals because if there were conflict on the world stage, America would be better off to use its own resources as opposed to having them imported. Ultimately no legislation passed to protect domestic mines from being undercut by foreign lead and zinc. The low tariff was the biggest factor in mines having to shut down in the Tri-State district.³⁵ The government's negligence to provide a steeper tariff on imported metal was the ultimate reason for the collapse of the Tri-State Zinc and Lead Producers' Association having to close down. In effect the government's greatest impact on the mining industry was not by passing legislation, but by neglecting to.

³⁴ Facts Showing Immediate Need For Passage of Mining Legislation, Domestic Mining Associations, 1950.

³⁵ Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza*, 178.

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